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ABSTRACT

Because of consistent faculty involvement from its earliest stages, the writing assessment program at the University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC) represents a competent, fair, and useful procedure for the large-scale testing and evaluation of student writing. UMKC's assessment curriculum builds on the existing sequence of three composition courses and subsequently moves progressively through instruction in composing tasks comprised of personal essays, expository essays, and essays based on reading. After the first two composition courses, students are required to take the Written English Proficiency Test (WEPT), which they must pass in order to take the third required course. The WEPT tests composing and reading skills defined by composition faculty, who have reached consensus about the necessary tasks to be taught in a college writing course. This consensus process represents a key issue in assessment, not only because faculty reach an agreement about performance standards to determine level of ability, but also because they participate in the WEPT grading sessions. Benefits to the English Department and to students include detailed scoring of exam essays which identify individual and program weaknesses, increased accessibility for all students to the junior-level composition courses, and clarified writing evaluation throughout the department. Teachers have more confidence about the grades they assign in class; students have faith in the consistent standards and grading procedures. (Three appendixes, including specific instructions for the WEPT and a scoring scale, and 31 references are attached.) (KEH)

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The Written English Proficiency Test at UMKC: An Intelligent Answer to an Unintelligent Question

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Writing Assessment at

The University of Missouri at Kansas City:

An Intelligent Answer to an Unintelligent Question

Joan Gilson

Abstract

This paper provides a survey of the literature and a historical and current overview of writing assessment in higher education. An account of the writing assessment program at the University of Missouri at Kansas City is also provided, detailing testing procedures and pedagogical and research contexts of the assessment program. The paper concludes that if faculty are not actively involved in all stages of the assessment process, assessment procedures will significantly hinder accessibility and certain important objectives of higher education.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Joan Rothstein-Vandergriff, Director of Writing Assessment at UMKC, for her kind suggestions and very good questions about the draft of this article. I am also grateful to Myrna Cassell, Professor of Higher Education, UMKC, for her information, tolerant and wide perspective, and most of all, for her sense of humor. This really would not have been a very good paper without the help of both these individuals.

The Written English Proficiency Test at UMKC

An Intelligent Answer to an Unintelligent Question

"The university must range itself on the side of intelligent solutions to sometimes unintelligent questions."

Clark Kerr, President, University of California

The Written English Proficiency Test at the University of Missouri at Kansas City is a recent, local development of the larger accountability movement of the 1960's, a movement whose advocates eventually instituted the widespread competency testing of college student skills beginning in the early 1970's. A complicated phenomenon, the accountability movement stemmed indirectly from educational philosophies and models current earlier in the twentieth century (Cooper, 1981) and directly from complex political, social and economic forces climaxing in the 1960's (Millet, 1981, 1987).

The particular group most affected by the accountability movement and its political cause celebre, assessment, are the college and university teachers whose curricula and classroom objectives were targeted by mass minimum competency testing mandated by legislatures across the nation (Blumenstyk, 1988a). English instructors at UMKC and elsewhere became involved in assessment very early in the

movement, probably because of the importance of writing and reading abilities in all kinds of learning and probably because it became clear quite quickly that writing instructors and students had a great deal to lose through the abuse of assessment procedures (Greenberg, 1986).

The writing assessment program at UMKC represents a competent, fair and useful procedure for the large-scale testing of student writing abilities, largely because of consistent faculty involvement from its earliest stages. The faculty here have used administrative support and funding resulting from state-mandated assessment to construct writing assessment and an assessment curriculum that supports clear, strong academic standards for reading and writing abilities. UMKC's writing assessment is determined by curriculum goals; assessment here does not control curriculum, rather, curriculum controls assessment. At the same time, our assessment program maintains the accessibility vital to a public university operating in a democracy. In addition to a historical and current overview of the UMKC Writing Assessment program, this paper offers several suggestions for the continued, effective implementation of that program and a reminder of the serious reservations about assessment that still remain.

Background

The educational and historical movements contributing to the accountability movement in general and to UMKC's

assessment program in particular were three. These included the Cult of Efficiency, Mastery Learning, and, in the 1960's, growing public dissatisfaction with higher education. Equating learning and teaching activities with dollar units, the Cult of Efficiency gained popularity with school superintendents and patrons in the 1920's (Callahan, 1962). The Mastery Learning model, widely adopted in schools three decades later, viewed the education process in terms of a set of discrete, highly predictable goals (Block, 1962). Both these educational concepts contributed to the creation of the popular view of education as a purchasable commodity, a perception that was exacerbated by events of the 1960's.

In the 1960's public attitudes toward education mutated into the political force known as the accountability movement. Taxpayers grew increasingly discontent with higher education, not a surprising result of their newly heavy tax burden, a burden which reflected the growing federal investment in colleges and universities (Gladieux, 1981, 1987; Cooper, 1981). At that time accountability also began to resemble consumerism, the reaction of the public to what it perceived as a defective educational product, the college graduate (Blumenstyk, 1988b), and an arrogant producer, the college faculty (Dressell, 1972). But perhaps more important than these developments was the growing recognition by the public of the necessity for a

college degree for economic survival. The work of higher education, the preservation, transmission and creation of knowledge, was beginning to be recognized by Americans as highly valuable in the kind of culture America was becoming in the 60's (Kerr, 1964), an information society.

In retrospect, then, it seems inevitable that the American public would begin to clamor for a specific accounting of so significant a portion of the GNP. The clamor began somewhat sedately, inspired by the increasingly critical Carneigie reports of the 1970's (Millet, 1981, 1987). In the 1980's the cry for accountability settled into specifics, and the terms assessment, minimal competency testing, and, of course, basic skills began to be heard in newspapers across the land. The publication of A Nation at Risk, a glib and exaggerated critique of schools published by Reagan's Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell (Spitzberg, 1981, 1987) added to the din. The clamor gained volume as the next Education Secretary, William Bennet, used his "Bully Pulpit" to further focus public attention and right wing propaganda (Sledd, 1988) against higher education (Gladieux & Lewis, 1981, 1987, pp. 178-9) with such effectiveness that state governments rapidly fell into line, mandating widespread competency testing for large numbers of college students.

In 1986, the National Governors' Association's Task Force on College Quality, chaired by Missouri Governor John

Ashcroft, published an agenda requiring that colleges and universities comprehensively test undergraduate students, that coordinating boards adjust institutional budgets to encourage this assessment, and that higher education institutions collect data on the results of the testing (Millet 1981, 1987). Coordinating boards, especially in Missouri, implemented their assigned responsibilities with eager dispatch, quickly linking college and university budget requests to those institutions' assessment plans. (McConnell, 1981, 1987). By 1988, twenty-four states required assessment in higher education, and twelve more were seriously considering doing so. (Blumenstyck, 1988b, p. A-19).

Initial Faculty Response

Testing on a fairly large scale was certainly not a new idea to English teachers. Writing Assessment and the field of composition had a legitimate and respectable testing history together long before Governor Ashcroft appeared on the scene or the accountability movement rated an entry in The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education. James Berlin, historian of rhetoric and composition instruction in the United States, notes that Harvard University required an essay test as early as 1874. (1987, p. 33). Another composition researcher, John Mellon (1975), details twentieth century writing testing efforts in his seminal work National Assessment and the Teaching of English

At UMKC, the English Department had been testing the writing abilities of students for twenty years, and so it was understandable that the English Department faculty here and elsewhere were suspicious of and resistant to the assessment movement of the eighties and to that movement's political, often conservative, alliances (Blumenstyck, 1988a). Further faculty suspicion was raised by the threats to academic freedom posed by such alliances (McConnell, 1981, 1987), and those suspicions were confirmed in at least two states, Florida and Tennessee, where legislators not only wrote laws requiring colleges to test, they also wrote portions of the actual tests (Blumenstyck, 1988a,).

Colleges everywhere, but English teachers most vocally, raised a number of objections to the new assessment movement. Teachers asserted that minimum competency testing would narrow curricula to the minimal level reflected on tests, that of the so-called basic skills, (Cooper, 1981); that insufficient money would be set aside for assessment education, the diagnosis and remediation of deficient writers (Blumenstyck, 1988a); that minimal expectations would be set too low, focusing on mastery of grammar skills rather than on the more complex composing skills (Cooper, 1981); and that publishing companies, already quite interested, would write the tests, tests that would not

reflect curricula and goals of individual institutions (Blumenstyck, 1988a).

To complicate matters further, not all English teachers and composition researchers were or are convinced that the problem of inept students is as simple or as pervasive as education critics and assessment advocates claim. Cooper (1981) found the evidence of declining student writing ability unconvincing, and said that basic, lower-level skills remained stable for student writers. Taking another tack, James Sledd (1988) wrote that student reading and writing problems represented a misperception by the older generation, a symptom of a centuries-old generation gap. Researchers Connors and Lunsford (1988), after an analysis of over 21,500 essays written by college students, concluded that, despite open admissions and vast changes in the profile of student populations, students in 1988 committed exactly the same number of errors per 100 words of written text as students did before World War I.

The majority of the English profession, however, including the UMKC English department, in hopes of avoiding punitive budget cuts (Blumenstyck, 1988a) and standardized tests, were persuaded by urgent pedagogical and political necessity. Therefore, with all due respect to Connors, Lunsford, Sledd and Cooper, we and the rest of the profession proceeded with the business at hand, large scale writing assessment.

Once the profession accepted the necessity of minimum competency testing, the major issues rapidly boiled down to two. The first issue concerned the need for essay tests as opposed to nationally published standardized grammar exams, a stand backed by numerous compositionists, including Cooper (1981), Greenberg (1982), Mellon (1975), Purnell (1982), and Sledd (1988), and further supported by the research of Bamburg (1982) and White (1986). The second, related, issue was that of local design of tests by English teachers, an issue carried to professional meetings across the country by its most persuasive advocate, Karen Greenberg, Project Director of the National Testing Network in Writing (Greenberg, 1982).

The Written English Proficiency Test

Both perspectives proved highly influential in UMKC's writing assessment program in late in 1986 when, in compliance with the mandate of the state coordinating board, we upgraded our twenty-year-old English Proficiency Test, (previously required only of all students receiving a "C" or below in Composition II) in order to begin the widespread testing of the reading and writing abilities of most rising juniors in the university.

The Composition Director hired a director of assessment and began the institution of an assessment curriculum of the sort recommended by a number of assessment advocates and critics, including Ashcroft (1987), Cooper, (1981), and

Greenberg (1982). UMKC's assessment curriculum builds on the existing sequence of three composition courses and subsequently moves progressively through instruction in composing tasks comprised of personal essays (expressive, responsive writing), expository essays (requiring students to analyze material), and essays based on reading (requiring students to synthesize material).

After the first two composition courses, students in the schools of Arts and Sciences, Medicine, and Business are required to take the Written English Proficiency Test, which they must pass in order to take a third, required, junior-level writing course and/or to graduate. The WEPT tests composing and reading skills defined by the composition faculty, who have reached consensus about the necessary tasks to be taught in a college writing course. By no small coincidence, those tasks resemble those outlined by faculty involvement advocate, Karen Greenberg (1982):

1. Students should be able to produce sustained, lengthy writing under a deadline.
2. Students should be able to write to a specific audience.
3. Students should be able to develop a coherent response to reading material.
4. Students should be able to write about personal feelings as well as about wider cultural issues.

5. Students should be able to practice and use a writing process that allows them to revise, re-compose and copyedit their writing. (pp. 372)

The three hour writing proficiency exam requires that the student write a clearly focused, developed essay based on their responses to and analyses of assigned reading material. Minimally competent or passing essays are organized in a nonconfusing manner with language that is clear and correct enough to convey meaning.

Very early in our assessment process, we defined minimal reading and writing competency with the help of other university faculty. This consensus process represents a key issue in assessment, according to McMillan (1988). Our assessment director held open meetings for all faculty in Arts and Sciences, and we examined numerous samples of student writing together. We discussed standards and reached agreement about the level of ability required for junior level course work and/or a college graduate. Since these early meetings, we have regularly invited all concerned faculty to participate in WEPT grading sessions.

The administration of the exam itself follows a standard procedure. Students eligible to take the exam can pick up the reading material for the test three days beforehand, during which time they may read, annotate, think about and respond to the material. Drawn from a variety of sources, including popular magazines, newspapers, and

scholarly journals, the readings are always on a topic accessible to students, as recommended by Freedman and Robinson (1982). (Previous topics have included "Heroes" "AIDS" and the labeling of rock and roll albums for obscene material.)

On the day of the exam, when students arrive at the testing room, they are issued stamped blue books (for security reasons) and are given a general writing prompt, which requires that they compose a rough draft and a final draft of a documented, expository essay about one aspect of the reading. Researchers (for example, Dunbar, 1988) find that reliability of scores increases for expository writing. The prompt mentions specific requirements for the essay: Clear focus, adequate development, clear organization, and correct language. The prompt also stipulates the audience for this particular writing task, teacher as examiner. (See Appendix A).

At the end of three hours, the essays are collected, alphabetized, and checked for completeness. Rough drafts are separated from final drafts unless the final draft is unfinished, in which case the rough draft is included for grading.

Once tests are collected, two expert readers from the English Composition staff are paid to read through the tests and choose several anchor tests, exams highly representative of various levels of the scoring criteria. These anchors,

which must be selected for each test administration, are then used to train graders, individuals solicited from the Composition staff and elsewhere in the University. Two or three of the anchor exams are evaluated, marked, and distributed along with the grading criteria to the graders during the subsequent week, in order that the graders can familiarize themselves with the standards before the official grading session.

On the day of the scoring, the graders (who are paid--an unusual situation according to Purnell, 1982) assemble in a comfortable room to begin the norming or training process. Copies of other, unmarked anchor exams are distributed to the graders, who read and score the papers. Everyone discusses the scores they assigned, referring to the grading criteria (see Appendix B) until everyone understands the criteria and how the rubric relates to the composing problems presented by that particular exam and its readings. This discussion represents the process of faculty debate and involvement necessary to the administration of meaningful, useful assessment. Such faculty discussion, like the earlier consensus process on standards, is advocated by numerous compositionists and assessment researchers, including Cooper& Odell (1977), Dunbar (1988), Greenberg (1982), and Raymond (1982), among others.

Once consensus is reached (approximately a two-hour process), scoring proceeds. Each exam is scored blindly by two readers, and exams with widely mismatched scores go to a third, more experienced reader. Any reader who consistently disagrees with two other readers is given the opportunity to re-norm, that is, to re-read the scoring criteria and rethink her own scoring process. Re-norming is a quiet process, done without embarrassment to the scorers, because all scorers need to particpate in it at some point. A consistent scoring pattern is the product of continuously reinforced habit of thought.

Students are notified of their test results several weeks after the exam. Failing students have several options. They can retake the exam until they pass it, they can get writing lab tutoring, or they can enroll in the remedial English course specifically designed for this test, English 299 (required for some majors and colleges in the university). The course, designed by the composition staff, features small classes and individualized attention and has a very good exam pass rate. Over three-quarters of its graduates have passed the WPT. (See Appendix C for sequence of courses and test.)

Several benefits to the English Department and to our students have resulted from the assessment process detailed here. Since the scoring of the exam is fairly detailed, we have been able to use data gleaned from exam results to

identify program weaknesses, (especially in the area of reading instruction) as recommended by Greenberg (1982) and as required by Ashcroft (Millet, 1981, 1987).

Another benefit of testing has been increased accessibility for all students to our junior-level composition courses, since at least 75% of the students who fail the exam and take the remedial writing course, English 299, subsequently pass the WEPT. Those students are then able to enter and remain in the 300-level writing courses. Also, teachers of those junior-level composition courses recently have begun to report that their students enter the courses as more able readers and writers now.

Finally, because virtually all the composition staff have participated in the WEPT grading sessions, they have all been able to join in the discussion of and setting of performance standards. These teachers report to us that they feel more confident about the grades they assign in class, and that they believe the consensus process has clarified writing evaluation throughout the department. In addition, students report via course evaluation surveys that they believe department grading procedures and standards for writing are highly consistent, not an easy accomplishment for a composition department.

Recommendations

As colleges continue with assessment efforts, it is important that we not neglect a number of issues related to

the fair and accurate testing of student abilities. New research and developments in large scale testing appear every year, after a dearth of such work in the early days of the movement (Greenberg, 1982) and three recent publications merit our attention.

Assessing Writer's Knowledge and Processes of Composing (1985) by Faigley, Cherry, Joliffe, and Skinner describes Performative Assessment, a detailed method of evaluating student ability to compose texts in response to appropriate contexts. Karen Greenberg and Harvey Weiner's Writing Assessment: Issues and Strategies (1986) provides a history of writing assessment and an overview of current issues in the field (Longman's). Edward White's Teaching and Assessing Writing: Recent Advances in Understanding Evaluation and Improving Student Performance contains much new data that will be helpful for implementing and evaluating a writing assessment program. All composition departments should own copies of all three books.

Another recommendation that composition departments might find useful is a change in assessment instrument. It may be wise to allow successfully completed course work to suffice as evidence that students have satisfied the writing proficiency requirement, as suggested by Purnell (1982).

I also recommend that composition departments consider another development in assessment, and that is the work done by The National Writing Project on assessment by portfolio,

a method of evaluating student writing by examining several examples of work written over a period of time for a variety of situations (Gallehr, 1987). This method is probably fairer to students because it provides them with numerous opportunities to write, and it avoids the pitfall of determining student fate with one test (Dunbar, 1988).

Probably another stage of any large-scale writing assessment effort shouldinclude an evaluation of testing procedures by a credentialed authority from outside the university, (a step recommended by Gallehr, 1987) or, even better, by an examination of student outcomes, effects of testing procedures on faculty, and further effects of assessment on other college programs and departments, as recommended by White (1985).

Concerns

But for the present, as we informally evaluate our assessment efforts, we should continue to frame our reflections about that process with our honest hopes for the entire process of education. We must not ignore a number of serious professional concerns about minimum competency testing and its ultimate usefulness to the school, to students, and to the culture.

We must remain aware that there is still a significant chance that competency test results will be used to evaluate and fiscally punish programs, departments, and schools.

Faculty and administration must remain vigilant and do what we can to prevent this abuse.

Also, we should not neglect, during our discussions of tests and standards, the issue of accessibility. Limited accessibility nearly always accompanies any assessment effort, unless faculty and administration work actively to prevent it. University English courses and the university itself must be available to all students, because the processes of reading and writing are of crucial importance not only to students, but to the existence of a free people. Paolo Friere, Brazilian literacy specialist and activist, accurately describes the importance of literacy when he says these skills are the means by which people can claim their rightful place in the world. Friere further asserts (and is supported in this assertion by the work of Bizzell, 1987 and Sledd, 1988) that American educational processes, unfortunately, often work to maintain an inequitable status quo by sustaining the artificial barriers and standards that prevent people from acquiring the abilities necessary to participate fully in the culture. (Friere & Macedo, 1987, p. 157). Assessment must not contribute to already inequitable conditions in American culture.

James Berlin also explains the goals of the writing course in broader cultural realities than are usually associated with any discussions of minimal competency. Berlin writes that the college English course should enable

students to learn something about themselves and to examine their own assumptions about the world. Composition courses, Berlin believes, should allow students to better understand the connections between themselves and other people and their culture. (1987, p. 189). Neither a test nor a narrowly focused, "basic skills" curriculum will do these things.

Finally, general university goals reflect a similar departure from the vocabulary of minimum competency, and these goals also belong in our conversations about assessment. Gross and Grambsch write that university goals include the maximum development of student intellect, that students be permanently affected by the major philosophy and ideas of the culture, and that students develop integrity and ethics. (1986, p. 13). None of these goals represent discrete, easily testable or easily teachable skills.

Assessment and assessment curricula will not substantially contribute to the accomplishment of these goals without consistent faculty involvement. English faculty must insure that minimal competency testing at least does not obscure these larger educational issues and, at most, that competency testing advances these goals. To paraphrase James Sledd, we must not be lulled into thinking that the mere act of testing minimal competency is the same as teaching people to read, write, and think critically, skeptically, and creatively (1988). These latter skills are

the only authentic basic skills. Not only do these skills represent the primary objective of the university English classroom, they also represent the chief means of survival for students and for the institution of higher education itself in a rapidly changing culture.

Appendix A
Prompt

SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE WEPT:

On the cover of each blue book, please put the following information:

Your Name
Student Number
Your major
Semester and year you entered UMKC

Use one blue book for your prewriting and drafting; use the second to copy and edit your final draft in. Please be sure the final draft is clearly marked. Please do not put the final draft in the same book as the rough draft.

THE ESSAY

Attached to the general information sheet are 6 articles, all dealing with the topic of heroes. You have 3 hours in which to write a documented, critical essay dealing with one of the issues/topics/aspects in the articles you see as significant. Your essay should explore and explain your views/opinions/concerns. Your essay should be well-developed with examples not only from the articles relevant to your topic but from your own knowledge, beliefs, and experience as well. Your essay should be documented correctly.

Do not merely summarize the articles! Your audience is teacher as examiner.

Your essay will be read for the following:

1. whether or not there is a clear point;
2. how well the point is supported, how well you use information from the articles, and whether you use it correctly;
3. how well-organized the paper is;
4. whether or not the usage and mechanical aspects are correct or distracting.

In order for you to do the best essay possible, we recommend the following time schedule:

30 minutes reading and thinking and jotting ideas
(use the questions provided on the article cover sheet and the tip sheet)

120 minutes prewriting, drafting, and revising

30 minutes copying final draft and proofreading it.

In other words, use the whole 3 hours you are allowed. You may take breaks as often as you wish; just leave everything on your desk and leave and return as quietly as you can.

Appendix B

EVALUATION SCALE FOR EPT SCORING:

A. Point/thesis/idea

4. The writer's point/purpose is very clear; one thoughtful idea clearly dominates the essay.

3. The writer's point/purpose is fairly clear; there are passages of thoughtful, related argument, but overall a thoughtful point/purpose is not sustained throughout the paper.

2. There is some/an attempt at a dominant idea evident, but it is not successful or not sustained throughout the paper.

1. Is not clear at all; there is no guiding principle to the essay; the author's point is not distinguishable at all.

B. Development/support/evidence

4. There is imaginative use of and a convincing amount of proof/support of the author's point(s). AND/OR--
There is effective and accurate use of sources to supplement the author's point; documentation has been correctly done. The author demonstrates the ability to integrate the material logically and responsibly into his/her argument.

3. There is effective use and an adequate amount of proof/support for the writer's ideas. AND/OR--
The use of sources is adequate both in integrating the information into the text and in correctness in documentation.

2. The examples/explanations are either inadequate to support the writer's ideas, or are not effective. AND/OR--
There has been some attempt to use the sources but the documentation is incorrect or inadequate, or there is evidence of merely token integration of the ideas from the readings.

1. There is little if any support of the author's point(s), or the evidence provided does not support the author's ideas. AND/OR--
There has been no attempt to use the sources, or the ideas fromt he readings have been used but not documented at all (plagiarism), or the writer has merely summarized the readings.

C. Organization/logic/coherence

4. The organizational pattern used is logical, easy to follow and rhetorically convincing; the essay works well as a whole.

3. The organizational pattern used is somewhat evident in that over-all the paper is fairly coherent, but there are some internal coherence problems (e.g., transitions between paragraphs).

2. The organizational pattern used is barely discernible or is illogical; an attempt at coherence is evident, but over-all there is little coherence in the ideas (e.g., each paragraph is coherent, but overall, there is little or questionable coherence).

1. There is no logical pattern of organization evident; the paper rambles from one topic to another without connecting them. There is no overall coherence.

D. Usage & mechanics

4. This is virtually error-free prose.

3. The reader noticed occasional errors in spelling, punctuation, diction, sentence logic etc., but generally experienced a smooth reading.

2. The reader was distracted by frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, diction, sentence logic etc. or many errors of one type, but was able to make sense of the text.

1. The reader was greatly distracted by many errors in spelling, punctuation, diction, sentence logic etc., and was unable to make sense of the text in more instances than not.

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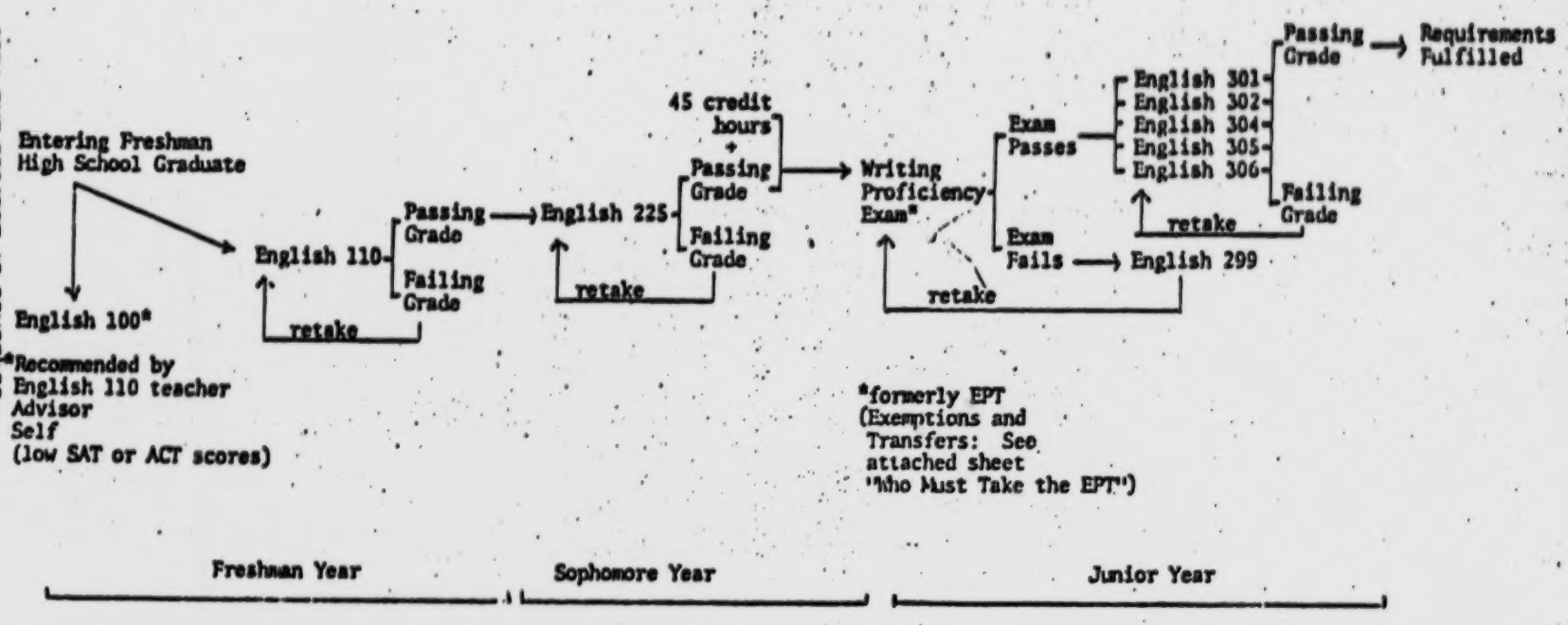
Appendix C
Sequence of Courses and Test

This process applies to students pursuing degree programs in
* College of Arts and Sciences
* Bloch School of Business and Public Administration
* School of Medicine

UMKC Undergraduate Composition Program: Entering Freshmen beginning Fall Semester 1987 and later.



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